

Art

Diverse Forces Remake the Seen

The Digital Age, big retrospectives and a major censorship battle were at art's forefront.

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

One of the more remarkable events in 1999 Los Angeles was the outpouring of throngs of faithful to greet the arrival of a digital laser replica of the famous image of the Virgin of Guadeloupe, whose original is enshrined in a Mexico City basilica. The 3-by-5-foot copy, blessed by the pope, toured some 50 local parishes before a farewell appearance in front of 50,000 worshippers at the LA Coliseum.

The popular veneration of a digital photograph is as sure a sign as any of the cataclysmic shift underway in modern perception. Visual culture has for centuries been securely based on optical lenses—from microscopes and telescopes to cameras—but the digital revolution is rapidly changing all that.

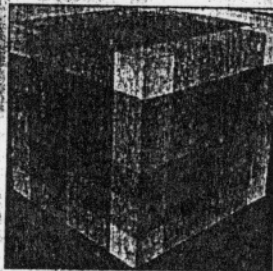
Here, in no particular order, are 10 exhibitions and art events also of unusual interest from the year, the decade and the century now coming to a close:

1 Two new Old Masters. Dosso Dossi (1496?-1542) was once a distinguished painter at the Renaissance court of Ferrara, Italy, though his work has long since been obscured in the shadow cast by nearby Venice. Adriaen de Vries (1556-1626) was a sculptor born in the Netherlands, trained in Italy and once the toast of Prague, but virtually forgotten for the last 300 years. Now, thanks to a remarkable pair of exhibitions initiated by the J. Paul Getty Museum, the reputations of Dosso and De Vries have been restored to their former luster. One such show in a given year



J. Paul Getty Museum

Adriaen de Vries' "Triton" was part of a show at Getty Center; Jim Isermann's "Cubeweave" was seen at the Santa Monica Museum of Art.



Sunshine & Noir Art

would have called for a standing ovation; two are amazing.

2 Pokémon Colorfield. Cartoons are the Esperanto of contemporary art, spoken the world around. Monique Prieto is the only artist I know, however, who brings the utterly contradictory aims of formalist abstract painting together with the sheer madness that makes cartoons

so appropriate to our time. Her consistently inventive work (think of a Morris Louis made by Phillip Guston), seen at ACME Gallery, shows that avant-garde and kitsch can happily marry.

3 Front-office dodge. Docent Stephanie Riseley had to engage an attorney to get her volunteer job

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back at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, after being summarily fired for having what was (by all accounts) a frank, sensitive and pre-approved discussion about Edward Kienholz's raucous, poignant, sexually charged masterpiece "Back Seat Dodge '38" (1964) with a tour group of curious fifth-graders. Museum officials caved to a complaint from the elementary school's principal—until Riseley's threat of a lawsuit wisely made them reconsider.

4 Pure beauty. Nearly five years slipped by without a gallery show by Alexis Smith (time flies when you're making huge, permanent public art installations around the country). Crowned by a small but sly homage to the odd couple of Mariene Dietrich and John Baldessari, her show of new mixed-media collages at Margo Leavin Gallery was marked by the generous mix of brains, skill and nuttiness that are Smith's distinctive trademark.

5 Anniversary rag. The 10th anniversary of the Culture War, launched in 1989 by social conservatives determined to bring down the National Endowment for the Arts, passed almost unnoticed—until the mayor of New York tried to shut down the Brooklyn Museum of Art for showing the mostly innocuous exhibition "Sensation: Young British Artists From the Saatchi Collection." As they say: First time tragedy, second time farce.

6 I don't want no retro spectacle. Jim Isermann at the Santa Monica Museum of Art; Sam Francis, Raymond Pettibon and Barbara Kruger at the Museum of Contemporary Art; and Eleanor Antin at LACMA together made for a very strong year of rewarding career surveys of important postwar artists.

7 R.I.P. Loud noises have been made for 30 years claiming that painting is dead, a critical position that helped fuel the subsequent prominence of performance, video, installation, photography and other nontraditional mediums. Painting, of course, continued unabated, one among many options, and is everywhere to be seen today; meanwhile, serious claims about the death of painting have virtually disappeared. Bow your heads for a moment of silence for the death of "the death of painting."

8 Solo gallery debuts. The flamboyant space-warp paintings by Phillip Argent shown at Post Warehouse Gallery were glittery icons of the Dot-com Decade; the brute tonnage of cast-concrete sculpture by Mexico City-based Santiago Sierra

at Ace Gallery likened current art to the ancient labors of Sisyphus; and the hypnotizing standoff between men and women in a two-screen video projection by Iran-born, New York-based Shirin Neshat at Patrick Painter Inc. contributed to her international ubiquity in the 1999 art scene. These three shows, however far apart aesthetically, made for auspicious solo gallery debuts in L.A.

9 Dynaton lives. Painter Lee Mullican (1919-1998) was widely known as a member of the Surrealist-inspired Dynaton Group on the West Coast. A fine selection of palette-knife paintings dating from 1948-1957 at Grant Selwyn Fine Art and a small but sharply chosen survey of works on paper at the UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum resonated with a surprisingly up-to-the-minute freshness.

10 The art Xene. Art and music have periodically embraced to salutary effect, most recently in 1970s punk. At Track 16 Gallery, "Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk" managed the tough task of chronicling a watershed moment simply by refusing to relinquish the sheer enthusiasm of fandom. If you weren't there (I wasn't) to witness Xene Cervenká, Black Flag and the rest, you missed it; but the subsequent art of Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon and others probably wouldn't have happened without it.

Christopher Knight is *The Times*' art critic.